A handful of red earth: dreams of rulers in Tabari’s history of prophets and kings

Weststeijn, J.K.

Citation for published version (APA):
DREAMS, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND NARRATOLOGY

Historians and literary critics have often voiced their astonishment about the peculiar nature of one of the most important works of classical Islamic literature: The History of Prophets and Kings by al-Ṭabarî (839-923 AD). This text seems a fragmentary compilation in which the author’s intentions remain opaque.

This thesis will take on the scholarly challenges presented by Ṭabarî’s chronicle by using a specific method: narratology. In order to implement this method in a fruitful way, a selection of motifs from the chronicle is subjected to detailed close-reading. For a number of practical and theoretical reasons, this selection will focus on the dream reports in the chronicle; among them, the dreams of rulers take pride of place. As official classical Islamic historiography employs an unadorned style to report realistic events and generally refrains from the use of metaphor and the description of miracles, predictive dreams stand out as those rare moments when significant symbolism occurs.

The research thus demarcated finds itself at the crossroads of two larger scholarly debates. On the one hand, dreams play a major role in classical Islam; analyzing them brings with it specialized historical knowledge. On the other hand, there is a complex debate about the
nature of classical Arabic history writing and how to approach it from a historian’s or literary critic’s point of view.

After outlining the problems posed by these two debates, the aim of this first chapter will be twofold: to justify the methodology that will be adopted to confront the problems inherent to the study of classical Islamic historiography, and to explain the choice of motifs that will be studied: the focus on dream reports.

DREAMS IN CLASSICAL ISLAM

Among the written heritage of classical Islam there are very few texts that do not contain references to dreams. As dreams played a central part in various fields of Islamic theology and philosophy, such as prophetology, epistemology and psychology, many philosophical treatises devote a section to the phenomenon of experiencing while asleep.\(^1\) Oneiromancy was reckoned by many as one of the orthodox Islamic sciences,\(^2\) and a large number of handbooks for dream interpreters has been preserved.\(^3\) Poets wrote about meeting their beloved in dreams,\(^4\) and in almost all genres of prose narrative—historiography, biography, belles-lettres anthologies—we can find dream reports, where all types of characters, caliphs, saints, slave women, even animals, relate each other their dreams.\(^5\) As yet, no passage has been found where a classical Arabic author categorically denies the possibility that dreams can contain truthful messages. In short, dreams must have played an important role in classical Islam.

If we want to study the function dreams fulfilled in the worldview of pre-modern Muslims, the most promising genre to start with appears to

---

be historiographical narrative. In the case of the lyrical motif of meeting the beloved in dreams, scholars have raised the question whether this was not just one of the stock set of motifs poets recycled from the pre-Islamic period that had in later times lost most of their relevance to the world outside the text. The philosophical treatises are highly theoretical and intended for too specialized an audience as to be considered representative. For the oneirical handbook, we lack context and do not know how and at what occasions they were used. The works of prose narrative, however, offer us dream reports in a non-dream context. They not only provide entire dreams, but also offer details such as the reaction of the dreamer, whom he relates it to and in what setting, the reaction of the interpreter, etc. Of the different narrative genres, historiography promises the best results, for here, contrary to biography and belles-lettres anthologies, the individual dream reports are embedded in a longer chronological sequence of reports that constitutes a larger narrative in itself. Finding out how dreams function as textual elements in these larger narratives will explain why they were used in such great numbers by classical Arabic authors. Eventually, this will disclose a tip of the veil of how dreams functioned in the world their texts refer to.

**Tabari’s Ṭārīkh and the History of Early Islam**

From the first three centuries of Islam dishearteningly little documentary evidence has been preserved. To comprehend the momentous events of this period, the life of Muhammad, the Arab conquest of the Middle East, the spread of Islam, Umayyad rule and the Abbasid revolution, we have to rely on literary works, such as medieval Arabic historiography. One of the earliest products of this genre that has come down to us in its complete form is the Ṭārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk, by Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarir b. Yazid al-Ṭabari (224-310/839-923). His Ṭārīkh is a universal history from Creation until the year 302 H. This work contains, in direct discourse, long quotations from the words of a large number of others than Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabari, apparently earlier authors. When Tabari’s work appeared, it apparently had such impact that it eclipsed almost all that had been written before him in this field. Now that they had the Ṭārīkh, scribes no longer copied earlier historiographical works in their entirety. As a result, the works of earlier historians have not come down to us. All that remains of their works are

---

6 See Jacobi, pp. 50-64.
citations found in the works of Tabari and his contemporaries. From now on, Tabari’s version of the history of the first three centuries of Islam became the standard account for all later historians to follow. In the entry on ‘historiography’ from the Encyclopaedia of Islam, we read:

The historical works of the late 3rd/9th and early 4th/10th centuries represent the culmination of historical writing in early Islam in two respects. First, they synthesised a vast corpus of narratives which had been collected and put into circulation over the previous 200 years. Second, they defined the religious and political meaning of these narratives in a manner that later Muslims found nearly definitive for many centuries. The syntheses composed around the beginning of the 4th/10th century attained such prestige that few later historians made any effort to investigate anew the first 200 years of Islamic history; they were usually content to copy and abridge the “classical” syntheses, in particular the vast chronicle of Abū Ḥaṣan al-Ṭabarî (d. 310/923). As a result, most of the older sources ceased to be copied or read in any systematic way.7

Because Tabari’s Tārīkh replaced the earlier works, it contains reports on the fundamental events of the first three centuries of Islam that can be found nowhere else. Modern historians who study early Islam simply cannot do without it: not only is the Tārīkh an indispensable source for historical reconstruction of the course of events from the first three centuries; it is also an indispensable source for those who want to understand pre-modern Islamic history writing. To reconstruct the early stages of Arabic historiography, we have to study the citations of earlier authors in Tabari’s text, as these are all that remain of this earlier phase. To fully understand later Arabo-Islamic historiography, we need to take account of the decisive influence exercised on this tradition by Tabari’s work.

As a synthesis of earlier history writing and a model for later historiography, Tabari’s text can rightly be seen as representative of an entire tradition. Its scope and influence make it the crown achievement of Arabic historiography, and thereby one of the major cultural artefacts of Islamic civilization, one of the classics. At the same time, some of the problems surrounding early Islamic historiography—which will be dealt with in more detail below—find their most radical expression in Tabari’s Tārīkh. The Tārīkh is not only the crown text of Islamic historiography, but also one of its most problematic achievements. Thus, a better understanding of Tabari’s Tārīkh will facilitate understanding of a large portion of pre-modern Islamic historiography.

7 R. S. Humphreys, ‘Tārīkh’, EF.
Perceived qualities of the Tārīkh

One of the factors that must have contributed to the Tārīkh’s popularity among modern historians is that it is not only indispensable to reconstruct the events of early Islam and the contents of early historiography, but that it also gives the reader the impression to be a reliable source for such reconstruction. In the absence of truly documentary evidence—inscriptions, archives, archaeological remains—Tabari’s Tārīkh appears the next best thing, an archive of documentary evidence in its own right. There are four formal aspects of the Tārīkh that contribute to this impression of the text as a highly reliable, almost documentary source: the realistic content; the dry style; Tabari’s method of quoting his sources; and last but not least, the scope of the work that seems to leave nothing out.

The events described in the Tārīkh appear credible as they are for the most part realistic events. Events of a fantastic nature, such as magic, miracles, superhuman powers, monsters, and animals that can speak are barely found in the Tārīkh. What is more, in the presentation of these events, Tabari and the sources he quotes use a dry, fact-oriented style, which means no flowery language and no metaphor.6 This makes Tabari and his sources seem to be interested in the efficient, matter-of-fact reporting of what actually happened, rather than in formal embellishment or the invention of a pleasing narrative.

A third quality that contributes to the impression of documentary reliability is that most of the text consists of direct quotations of earlier sources, many of whom appear as eyewitnesses to the events they describe. Tabari meticulously states the provenance of these sources: every quotation is preceded by an isnād, an often highly detailed list of transmitters. The compiler of the Tārīkh has taken the effort of collecting different accounts of the same event. Even if such accounts only vary in detail, he assiduously quotes them all, one after another. Moreover, the compiler allows these sources to speak for themselves; he barely uses his own voice. All this leads to the impression that Tabari is more interested in preserving the exact wording of his sources for posterity than in pressing his own agenda, or in tendentiously manipulating the historical record to grind his own religious or political axe.

Finally, the wide scope of the work (almost eight thousand pages in the Leiden edition)\(^5\) allows for a highly detailed coverage of events, that results in, among other things, a plethora of personal names of historical actors and of transmitters of reports. This gives the impression of an exhaustive, comprehensive covering of the period under review, especially of the period from the rise of Islam until the author’s own time.

In sum, the Tārīkh’s style gives rise to two impressions. Firstly, Tabari’s text appears as a highly reliable repository of carefully quoted earlier texts, as if it were the transcript of an archive of documents. Secondly, it appears as if these earlier sources contained in the Tārīkh can be used unconditionally for the reconstruction of the actual course of events. These two impressions related to the Tārīkh’s formal aspects suggest modern scholars that the text can solve two problems:

1. The fact that earlier works of classical Islamic history writing have not survived seems less problematic since large sections of these texts appear to have been reliably preserved in the Tārīkh.
2. The fact that the Tārīkh was only composed in the second part of the third century H, i.e. hundreds of years after many of the events it describes, seems unproblematic since the text appears to have preserved the reports of eyewitnesses to these events in a reliable manner.

That this view towards Tabari’s ideas of history writing has been accepted by many modern scholars may be concluded from the entry devoted to him in the Encyclopaedia of Islam:

The great virtues of his History and Commentary are that they form the most extensive of extant early works of Islamic scholarship and that they preserve for us the greatest array of citations from lost sources. They thus furnish modern scholarship with the richest and most detailed sources for the political history of the early caliphate…Al-Ṭabarî gave parallel accounts from all these last authorities of earlier Islamic times, rather than attempting to furnish a conflated, connected story of historical events, even when the parallel accounts could not easily be harmonised or were even contradictory. His aim was, rather, to present the evidence for the course of the early Islamic history of the lands between Egypt and the far eastern fringes of the Iranian world so that others could evaluate it in a more critical fashion should they so wish.\(^10\)

---

\(^5\) Ṭabarī, Annales quos scriptit Abu Djarfar Mohammed Ibn Djarîr At-Ṭabarî, ed. M.J. de Goeje e.a., (Lugd.ni Bat.: E.J. Brill, 1879-1901).

However, with classical Islamic historiography, things are not as unambiguous as presented in this entry. Scholars studying the History of Prophets and Kings are confronted with four interrelated problems: the work’s fragmentary style; the absence of editorial comments; the text’s inherently contradictory nature, which inspires questions about the relation between text and historical fact; and the issue of authorship: the origin of the reports and the ultimate responsibility for their compilation.

The first problem: style

While modern readers were impressed by the scope of Tabari’s work, his attention to detail and his meticulous statements on the provenance of his sources, they were at the same time irritated by his text. A modern ideal of history writing holds that the author does more than just gluing his sources one after the other, or simply presenting the bare sources he has collected, or merely summing up a list of past events. According to this ideal, a writer of history should provide an analysis of his materials. He is expected to resolve contradictions between his sources, to highlight those events that are more important than others, and to tie individual events together by explaining relations of cause and effect. Ideally, he should situate these events in a larger pattern that is supposed to govern the course of history. Finally, we expect him to present these findings in the form of a continuous, focussed and coherent narrative. To quote John Burrow’s A History of Histories (2008):

History as a genre...characteristically involves extended narrative, relevant circumstantial detail, and thematic coherence; the recording of facts is dictated by thematic, dramatic and explanatory considerations, rather than just chronological juxtaposition.\(^{11}\)

To many modern readers, Tabari’s work did not meet their expectations of what history writing should be like. In the first place, most scholars have found the Tārikh uneasy to read because it seems to lack a major theme. As Stephen Humphreys puts it in his Islamic History, Tabari failed to ‘portray (to follow Aristotle’s language) a single action, a unified story leading up to a clear dramatic resolution’.\(^{12}\) We may quote Hum-

---


phreys’ influential judgement in more detail when he writes that the
authors of historiographical works such as Tabari’s Tārīkh never inter-
vene in the narrative to explain its overall significance.

These vast compilations make no effort to construct a unified narrative of
events. On the contrary, they consist of a series of discrete reports (Ar. ḥabar,
pl. ṣaḥbār) varying in length from a line to several pages. These ṣaḥbār are not
linked by a narrative thread; they are simply juxtaposed end to end, each being
marked off from the others by its own isnād. A compiler might select several
reports pertaining to a given event, and these could variously repeat, overlap, or
contradict one another...None of these historians...ever intervenes in the
narrative to explain its overall significance or to pass judgment on the actors.\(^{13}\)

Not only was the Tārīkh perceived to lack a unifying narrative thread,
the fact that slightly different reports describing the same event are
included one after the other, each one of them preceded by a tedious
isnād, or a list of transmitters, leads to disturbing interruptions, repeti-
tions and contradictions.

The second problem: editorial comment

In the eyes of most modern readers, Tabari not only failed to provide a
single, uninterrupted story line, but he also failed to provide comment
on events, on his sources and to solve the contradictions between con-
flicting accounts. At first view, the compiler of the Tārīkh simply sums
up events and quotes eyewitness reports; he does not in his own voice
comment on the possible importance of events or their relationship to
each other. In the words of Tayeb el-Hibri: ‘Modern historians have
often lamented the annalist style of the early Islamic chronicles,
which do not show the chronicle commenting on the events being re-
counted, and Ṭabārī has always stood as the prime example of this si-
ence.’\(^{14}\)

When quoting different accounts of the same events, Tabari fails to
express his preference for one of these accounts over the others. Con-
flicting versions are simply juxtaposed, contradictions are not resolved.
The absence of an explicit authorial voice has presented serious inter-
pretative problems relative to Tabari’s expected role as an historian.
The lack of a single, uninterrupted story-line just makes the text a hard
read. Those who wished to use his Tārīkh to reconstruct past events,

\(^{13}\) Humphreys, ‘Tārīkh’.

\(^{14}\) Tayeb El-Hibri, Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of
however, were in need of the author’s explicit viewpoint in order to be able to separate reliable reports and transmitters from unreliable ones. The fact that the Tārīkh fails to comply with much of what a modern audience expects from a proper piece of history writing, has led to three different assumptions about its author. First, there is the radical assumption, expressed by Jacob Lassner for instance, that the Tārīkh never had a real author: it was a fairly random collection of quotations from earlier works, compiled by a group of unorganized scribes:

The greatest chronicles describing early ‘Abbāsid history [the reference is to Tābarî a.o.] are composite works that do not bear the clear stamp of an acknowledged author. Compiled from accounts drawn from earlier treatises, these impressible texts give the impression of having been assembled by an editor supported by numerous assistants.15

A second group of scholars maintains that, even if the Tārīkh was the work of a single individual who collected, selected and compiled all sources on his own, this ‘author’ was nothing more than an unimaginative bookkeeper with no literary aspirations and no personal opinion on the sources he quoted or on the events they speak about. Humphreys, for instance, labels Tābarî as ‘this most self-effacing and impersonal of Muslim historians’ and speaks of ‘the way Tābarî has traditionally been viewed in both Muslim and Western scholarship—as an exceedingly industrious, thorough, honest drudge (everyone’s favorite B+ good student)’.16 Elsewhere, he writes:

The reluctance of men like al-Ṭabarî to speak in their own voice, to state explicitly the sense and significance of the materials which they have so laboriously assembled, has been an acute problem for many an Orientalist. In some cases it has even led to the conclusion that these scholars did not think at all, that they were in fact mere compilers.17

In a textbook for students of classical Arabic literature, Ilse Lichtenstader tries to defend the perceived absence of editorial comment in the Tārīkh by turning it into a virtue. She argues that it was Tābarî’s conscious choice to bracket his own judgement and leave the interpretation of events to his readers:

17 Humphreys, Islamic History, pp. 73-4.
He held back his own judgement in order not to preudge his sources. Indeed, by registering impartially all available evidence, al-Ṭabarî showed his awareness that even the smallest detail—particularly in controversial issues—might become a factor in bringing out the truth. He himself, however, abstained from pre-judgement; it is as if he were saying to his readers: “I have collected for you all the evidence—now you be the judge as to how it really came to pass.”

A third outlook towards the author of the Ṭārīkh, that was first proposed by Marshall Hodgson in 1961 and adopted again by Stefan Leder in the early 1990s, has gained ground during the last decade. Hodgson formulates the view that compilers like Tabari did have a strong religio-political opinion on past events, but that they presented this opinion in an implicit, indirect way. Most of the proponents of this point of view have focussed on the Rashidun section of Tabari’s Ṭārīkh, and argue that Tabari indirectly put forward his opinion by arranging his material in a certain order. Of course, the assumption that Tabari presented his opinions indirectly is controversial: one question it raises is why Tabari, if he truly had an opinion on past events and wished to communicate it, preferred implicit over explicit statements. It is to this question, however, that the scholars adhering to this point of view have failed to provide a satisfying answer.

18 Ilse Lichtenstadter, Introduction to Classical Arabic Literature, with Selections from Representative Works in English Translation (New York: Twayne, 1974), 54.
In *Les Arabes et l’appropriation de l’histoire* (2004), Abdessalem Cheddadi gives voice to the mixture of admiration and irritation felt by modern scholars when they are confronted with classical Islamic historiography:

L’historiographie arabo-musulmane a toujours suscité chez les chercheurs modernes des sentiments mêlés...L’importance qu’elle accorde à la chronologie, le sens de l’histoire qui s’y exprime, l’exactitude qu’elle sait parfois déployer dans la relation des faits, ...la masse énorme des faits qu’elle se montre capable de drainer sont autant de facteurs qui la rapprochent indubitablement de la conception que nous nous faisons de l’histoire. Mais l’organisation de l’œuvre avec la fragmentation du récit et la simple juxtaposition des informations, la sécheresse du style, une prosopographie envahissante, ...l’encombrant et souvent inutile usage des chaînes de garants (isnād) dressent entre elle et nous une barrière d’étrangereté et d’incompréhension.21

We will return at various moments to the scholarly challenge posed by the ‘barrier of strangeness’ resulting from the anomalous style of the *Tārīkh* and the lack of explicit editorial comment by its compiler Tabari. The problems relative to the work’s style and lack of editorial comment appear difficult to solve because they are intertwined with two other questions, relating to the world outside the text. How reliable, after all, are the reports quoted in the *Tārīkh* for a reconstruction of the actual course of events? Who should be considered as the author(s) of these reports?

*The third problem: the reports in relation to reality*

Modern historians of early Islam have wished to establish the reliability of the reports quoted by Tabari as historical documentation. Although they seem to provide fairly trustworthy coverage of real events, they cannot be taken at face value for historical reconstruction for the simple reason that many accounts of the same event flatly contradict each other. In his *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, Fred Donner writes:

Even a quick reading of some of the main literary sources for Islamic origins—particularly narratives on this theme—reveals internal complexities that give pause to the serious researcher. Chronological discrepancies and absurdities

---

abound, as do flat contradictions in the meaning of events or even, less frequently, on their fundamental course.22

When Tabari’s quotes conflicting eyewitness reports of the same event, it is virtually impossible to establish which one of them provides the account that is closest to historical fact. Due to the paucity of documentary evidence about classical Islam, no external sources can help us to separate fact from fiction and to decide which version is the most reliable.

It appears that we can only solve this third problem, the reports’ relation to reality, if we first solve the two previous problems of style and editorial comment. Due to the text’s style, more similar to the transcript of an archive of documents than to a story, the contents of the Tārīkh look like facts rather than fictions. To what extent can we trust this appearance if the sources quoted are contradictory and consequently many of them must be false? Is the factual, realistic style just a façade of make-belief? Here the work’s lack of editorial comment is felt: Tabari must have known some of his transmitters personally and had read their works in their entirety, but he never says which account or what transmitter he believes to be the most reliable. Nor does he state the selection criteria he used to include quotations. The question arises whether he included everything he could lay his hand on or only those accounts of which he judged the contents and transmitters reliable.

Finally, to decide which reports are factual and which not, it seems we first need to establish with certainty in what period they were created and when they found the form in which they appear in the Tārīkh. Once we know, for example, that a report about Muhammad was created by someone living many years after the Prophet’s death, or even by Tabari himself, we have more grounds to denounce it as fiction than if we know that it was created by an actual eyewitness.

The fourth problem: authorship

The presence of variant accounts of the same events raises more questions than just documentary reliability. The different versions must either be distortions of the truth by biased eyewitnesses with an axe to grind, or rewrites of the reliable original by partisan transmitters or by the final compiler. They may also be outright inventions produced

by someone somewhere along this scale. In fact, we do not know what changes occurred during the process of transmission, nor do we know whether Tabari really quoted his sources verbatim. Humphreys explains in his *Islamic History*:

Presumably, most of our accounts concerning the first six or seven decades of Islam originated as oral statements, and were only committed to writing at some later point. But...scholars do not agree as to the time of when such oral accounts began to be systematically collected and written down. Nor is it likely that once a given khabar was committed to writing, it would remain fixed in that form forever after...In brief, the way in which the ancient historical tradition was recorded and transmitted left manifold sins of omission and commission.23

To understand why eyewitnesses or transmitters distorted or embellished the truth, we would like to know more about them as authors: What politico-religious factions did they belong to? Against the backdrop of what events did they write? What were their aesthetic criteria? Which rules of transmission did they adhere to?

We do not know at what moment the reports quoted in the Tārikh found their final form. Although most reports are preceded by a chain of transmission which goes back to a contemporary witness, we are not sure how much faith to put in such isnāds. It is, therefore, unclear who should be considered as the authors of these reports: the witness, one of the transmitters, or the compiler Tabari. Even if we assume that Tabari did change nothing to the words of his sources, it remains unclear whether we should consider the reports he quotes as reflecting his own authorial opinion.

This fourth problem of authorship boils down to these questions: When, how, why and by whom were Tabari’s sources actually written? What parts of the Tārikh should we attribute to Tabari and what parts to the authors of his sources? Which parts reflect whose opinion? As Tabari’s sources, oral or written, have not been preserved in their original form, there are again no external arguments to answer these questions. We have to look for clues in the text of the Tārikh itself: we can only solve the problem of authorship if we first solve the problem of editorial comment. Apparently, to locate those parts that reflect Tabari’s opinion, we first have to understand the way Tabari commented on his materials.

23 Humphreys, *Islamic History*, p. 86.
A vicious circle

We see that the problems we want to solve in this thesis, style and editorial comment, are tightly interrelated with two other problems, relation with reality and authorship. To understand the strange style of the Tārikh and find out why it does not comply with our expectations of historiographical narrative, it seems we first need to differentiate the parts of the work that are reportage of actual events from the parts that are fiction. Likewise, to understand the work’s structure it seems we first have to understand whether Tabari slavishly copied his textual format from his predecessors or whether it was his original creation. In the case of the problem of editorial comment, it seems we can only understand whether and how Tabari judged his sources if we can ascertain whether he copied his sources verbatim. Apparently, the questions relative to style and editorial comment can only be answered if the problems of documentary reliability and authorship are resolved first.

Unsurprisingly, this brings us to a vicious circle. As explained above, to decide which parts of the Tārikh are reliable historical documentation, we have to better understand who wrote these parts (the problem of authorship), whether the Tārikh’s dry style is really a sign of documentary reliability (the problem of style) and whether Tabari deemed some of his sources more trustworthy than others (the problem of editorial comment). To make matters worse, it may be noted that we can only differentiate the parts of the Tārikh that reflect the author’s vantage point from those that reflect the opinions of others when we fully understand the work’s style and the ratio behind the compilation process.

In sum, we can only solve problems of 1) style and 2) editorial comment if we solve the problems of 3) relation with reality and 4) authorship, but they in their turn can only be solved if we solve the problems of style and authorship first. This vicious cycle seems to lead to a scholarly dead end: in the words of Fred Donner, ‘this uncertainty about the Islamic sources has gradually undermined historians’ confidence in almost every aspect of the traditional view of Islamic origins.’

As historical evidence from outside the text is lacking, the only way forward is to temporarily bracket all questions relative to the authorship of the reports quoted by Tabari and of their relation to reality. If we focus on the text as text, and try to find an explanation from inside the text for

---

24 Donner, p. 2.
its strange style and for the lack of an explicit authorial voice, we will
better understand Tabari’s work as a writer of history. Maybe this will
ultimately allow us to say more about the text’s relation to reality and
the authorship of its sources; then our findings will be valuable to
modern scholarship that envisions a reconstruction of early Islamic
history.

I do not need to spend many words on the fact that these findings
may have a wider impact than just Tabari’s work. Because of its
apparent incorporation of earlier works and its decisive influence on
later authors, the Taʾriḵh is representative of much of Arabo-Islamic
historiography. At the same time, it may well be the most radical ex-
pression of some of the problems surrounding early Islamic historio-
graphy. In addition, our conclusions may be relevant to other genres in
classical Arabic prose as well, that are similar to historiography or
otherwise indebted to it, such as geographical or prosopographical
works that are encyclopaedic in nature.

THE WAY OUT PROVIDED BY NARRATOLOGY

This thesis will try to find a way out of the problems posed by classical
Islamic historiography by looking at the Taʾriḵh as a self-contained
whole. It will do this using the specific method of narratology, the study
of storytelling techniques. From its inception, narratology has set as
one of its goals to disentangle the text from the person who produced it
and the reality it refers to. The method of narratology provides a
looking glass that, while focussing on the text itself, temporarily blocks
author and reality from view. In the words of Mieke Bal, a
narratological analysis “temporarily brackets both ends of the embed-
ding reality, the reality of the events “out there” and the reality of the...
reporter; for the duration of a prior analysis, the narratologist pre-
supposes that the narrative is structurally self-sufficient, hence
fictional.”25 Because narratology hands us concepts to analyze and
describe a text without touching upon reality and author, it provides us
a method to disentangle the complex of problems inherent to classical
Islamic historiography. Narratology helps us to disentangle the
problematic style and lack of editorial comment from questions relative
to documentary value and authorship.

25 Mieke Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (Toronto: University of
Another goal of narratology has been to think and write about texts in concepts that are valueless and not cultural-specific. Although originally developed on the basis of the study of the modern European and American novel, narratology tries to provide terms that are universally applicable to the study of all types of narratives from all times and all places. This brings us to another argument to use narratology to deal with the Tārīkh: it helps us to approach a text that appears so foreign in an objective, unbiased way. It helps us to rise above the negative dismissal ‘this does not look like what we are used to’ and provides the terminology for a more constructive and positive description. Narratology hands us the tools to correctly approach the problem of style.

Many of the problems encountered by modern scholars who wished to interpret classical Arabic history writing arose from the neglect of distinctions that are obvious in narratology. First and foremost, narratology can help us to disentangle the problem of editorial comment from the problem of authorship because (by focussing on who narrates what) it sharply distinguishes between the author of a text and its various narrators. As this is an essential insight for the analysis that will be followed in the next chapters, we will devote some extra attention to it.

The distinction between author and primary narrator

From a narratological perspective, the most important aspect of any narrative text is the narrator.26 Because this narrator can quote characters who themselves tell stories (as, in fact, happens constantly in the Tārīkh when transmitters report to the narrator accounts they heard or when eyewitnesses relate events they witnessed) narratology makes a distinction between the primary narrator of a text and eventual secondary narrators that are quoted by this primary narrator.

To help readers understand the rhetorical effect of overtly fictional texts such as the novel, it is common practice to remind them that they should distinguish the primary narrator of this text from its author.27 This distinction is necessary because readers are inclined to assume automatically that the two are identical, that the primary narrator is the author. Readers often believe that the opinions put forward by the narrator are an expression of the author’s opinions. When the narrator is also the protagonist of the story he tells, readers tend to consider this

---

26 Bal, p. 19.
27 Bal, p. 18.
story as an autobiographical account of events which actually took place in the author’s life. A famous example in the history of literature demonstrating that one should not naively assume that author and narrator are identical is provided by the novel Lolita, where the author is called Vladimir Nabokov, while the narrator and protagonist who confesses his violation of a minor bears the name Humbert Humbert.

To avoid such confusions, narratology approaches the narrators of all texts, whether these texts are overtly fictional or claim to be factual such as historiography, as fictive personae created by the author. By the narratological definition, the author is a person of flesh and blood who exists in reality, whereas the narrator is a persona made on paper, only existing in the world of the text. Bal explains this distinction as follows:

A narrative text is a text in which a narrative agent tells a story...It hardly needs mentioning that this agent is not the (biographical) author of the narrative...Rather, the writer withdraws and calls upon a fictitious spokesman, an agent technically known as the narrator. 28

What makes things complicated, however, is that authors often consciously create the narrator of their text after their own likeness. The fictive narrator Humbert Humbert, for example, is a European literary scholar who migrated to the United States, exactly like his author Vladimir Nabokov. Writers, in other words, use the reader’s tendency to equate narrator with author for rhetorical effect. If the fictive narrator resembles a real-life author, this makes the narrator appear more lifelike and this will strengthen his story’s claim to truth. It also works the other way: the author can give his primary narrator qualities that he himself could not humanly possess, like absolute neutrality, omniscience, or the capacity to be in several places at the same time. As readers tend to equate narrator and author, the positive qualities of this narrator make the author look wiser, more reliable, and thus more persuasive.

Although the distinction between author and narrator was developed in order to better understand the convincing power of the fictional novel, it can also be highly useful for analyzing the rhetorical effects of other genres of narrative, such as historiography. Just like or maybe even more than authors of fiction, historians are highly concerned with persuading the reader that their narrative of past events is not just fantasy but a truthful account of what actually happened, and in casting themselves in the role of the most reliable conveyor of

information about the past. Here I argue that to understand the rhetorical effect of the Tārikh, it is necessary to distinguish between Tabari, the flesh-and-blood author who also wrote a number of other works, and the primary narrator, a persona created by Tabari that only exists within the textual context of this chronicle.29

It should be noted here that the discussion about author versus narrator is not exactly the same as another discussion that also revolves around notions of ‘authorship’, but here in the sense of intellectual ownership: the debate about original creation versus plagiarism, and the questions raised in this debate such as which parts of the Tārikh were created by Tabari, and which parts he copied from the works of other authors. Narratology considers the real-life person who produced the text in its present form as the one and only author, regardless of whether all of the text is his ‘original creation’ or whether he copied or edited samples from the works of others. Likewise, because narratology temporarily ignores the reality outside the text, it considers all narrators, primary as well as secondary, as fictional characters created by this author, even when such narrators bear the names of real life authors or other real life persons, such as Ibn Ishāq or Hārūn al-Rashīd.

From the perspective of narratology, both the primary and the secondary narrators are creations of the author Tabari, mouthpieces he uses to make his story more persuasive. Of course, this does not mean that a researcher who approaches the Tārikh form a narratological point of view has to actually believe that all these narrators are merely figments of Tabari’s overheated imagination, that all chains of transmitters are fake, the reported events never took place, and there never really was a prophet called Muhammad to begin with.30 Narratologists simply state that it is not necessary to discern fact from fiction in order to assess the rhetorical effects of a text on its readers.

Until now, most modern readers of the Tārikh have failed to take into account these analytical distinctions brought forward by narratology. They failed to distinguish clearly between the author Tabari and the primary narrator of his Tārikh. Thus they assumed the words uttered by the primary narrator—and only these words—to be a straightforward

29 The Tārikh itself also speaks against uncritical equation of Tabari with the main narrator, for this (anonymous) primary narrator sometimes quotes an informant, a secondary narrator who is called Abū Ja’far (i.e. al-Ṭabari). See for example khabar nr. 193.7.1 from Table II, ‘Primary narrator speech in year chapter 193’, corresponding to Tabari, Tārikh, III, p. 765.
rendition of Tabari’s opinion. Because they equated the author with the primary narrator, the paucity of primary narrator speech in this work (compared to the superabundance of secondary narrator speech) and the absence of comment in his words made them assume the Ṭārīkh had no real author. At the same time, they equated the secondary narrators with other authors than Tabari, and thus uncritically assumed that the words uttered by these secondary narrators were an accurate rendering of assumed texts created by real life predecessors, and reflecting the opinion of these earlier authors, not those of Tabari. They failed to take account of the possibility that Tabari uses these secondary narrators in the same way as he uses the primary narrator: to bring across his opinion indirectly.

As regards the debate about editorial comment, if the primary narrator does not comment on events or on the trustworthiness of the secondary narrators, this does not mean automatically that the author Tabari did not comment on events or on his sources.

Narratology only looks at the narrators of a text, while consciously ignoring the real life author and the question whether he and his transmitters faithfully recorded or manipulated their sources. This way, a narratological approach is able to steer clear of the complex discussion about authorship in the sense of the intellectual ownership of the different parts of the Ṭārīkh.

As Bal puts it, ‘the distinction between author and narrator...helps to disentangle the different voices that speak in a text so as to make room for the reader’s input in [assessing] the relative persuasiveness of those voices.’31 In other words, narratology allows us to draw meaningful conclusions about the effect of the Ṭārīkh on its readers while postponing the answer to questions of intellectual ownership. Ultimately, however, our findings will also be relevant to the world outside the text of the Ṭārīkh: they reveal something about the intentions of the flesh-and-blood author Tabari, about how he expected his audience to react, and how he and his public remembered the history of Early Islam.

Approaches of the Ṭārīkh as a literary text

The following chapters will be the first study to explicitly advocate the use of narratology to escape from the scholarly deadlock concerning classical Islamic history writing. As there have been others who have approached classical Arabic historiography from the vantage point of

31 Bal, p. 18.
literary theory in general, I list a number of key authors to compile an adequate status quaestionis. An explicitly narratological study of classical Arabic prose that must be mentioned is Daniel Beaumont’s ‘Hard-Boiled: Narrative Discourse in Early Muslim Traditions’ (1996). For our aims of analyzing the structure of a compilatory work, however, this author does not provide many insights as he focuses on the structure of the individual khabar and not on that of the compilation as a whole.

Three monographs by authors who are not self-acclaimed narratologists examine literary aspects without touching on the core objects of narratology (such as establishing what part of the text is narrated by which agent). Albrecht Noth’s Quellenkritische Studien zu Themen, Formen und Tendenzen frühislamischer Geschichtsüberlieferung (1973) provides, on the basis of an analysis of a wide array of sources, a list of narrative motifs that are found in classical Arabic historiography. Noth charts the recurrence of the same motif in different akhbar in order to prove that their reports are unreliable for historical reconstruction. The second part of his book, that was intended to deal with the ‘Tendenzen’, never appeared, so the author only provides a list of motifs without analysing the narrative effects of their use. It is interesting to note that his search for motifs is aimed at arguing that the recurrence of topoi proofs that texts like Tabari’s chronicle should not be seen as the work of a single author, in contrast to what is argued by scholars like Boaz Shoshan and what recently appears to have become scholarly consensus.

Tayeb El-Hibri’s Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Ḥārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate (1999) sets out to analyse the literary qualities in classical Arabic texts on the early Abbasids, among them Tabari’s Tārikh. El-Hibri sees a large number of indirect intertextual references between akhbar found in different compilations, and concludes that these reports must have been created by a group of reporters that shared the same aesthetic criteria. In some instances, El-Hibri gets carried away by his search for hidden allusions, but, more importantly, he fails to explain why these allusions had to remain indirect.

Apparently in reaction to El-Hibri’s search for hidden allusions, Boaz Shoshan’s *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Tabari’s ‘History’* (2004) has focused on those narrative strategies that can be indicated on the surface of the *Tārikh*. Shoshan names a number of such narrative strategies, and adduces long lists of examples from the *Tārikh*, but fails to analyse the effect of these strategies on the reader.

In his *Figures de califes entre histoire et fiction* (2006), Matthias Vogt has searched a large number of compilations for reports that deal with the Abbasid caliph al-Amīn and the Umayyad caliph al-Walîd b. Yazîd.34 By comparing these reports, Vogt tries to identify the position taken towards these caliphs by the author of each compilation. The strength of this study, in comparison to the work of El-Hibri, is that Vogt does take into account in which compilation reports are found and what position these reports occupy within the larger structure of the compilation as a whole. Vogt notices that Tabari has included in his *Tārikh* reports in favor of the caliph al-Amīn as well as reports against in him, and concludes on this basis that Tabari did not want to choose sides.35 I would argue here that Tabari painted an ambivalent picture of al-Amīn, not to remain politically neutral, but, on the contrary, to bring across a highly charged assessment. To add both literary and political sophistication to his presentation of events, Tabari showed that good and evil are not easily separated, and that Abbasid caliph have complex, tragic personalities.

**DREAMS, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND NARRATOLOGY**

Narratology thrives on the close-reading of texts. Our research will therefore focus on selected passages: analyzing the *Tārikh* in its entirety, counting almost eight thousand pages in the first printed edition, would be contrary to our research aims. To be able to draw conclusions about Tabari’s narrative strategies throughout the text as a whole, our focus on dream reports has several advantages.

Choosing a single episode such as the biography of a single caliph, or a restricted number of subsequent years, has a drawback. It could be that the sources Tabari consulted for this section were different in style than the sources he used for the other parts of his chronicle. Therefore, this particular section might reflect the idiosyncrasies of the particular

---

35 Vogt, p. 191.
sources Tabari used for that portion of his Tārikh, rather than Tabari’s own style. This drawback is present in the work of those historians studying Tabari only in their attempt at reconstructing specific historic events: they fail to take account of his textual strategies.

A better way of selecting a workable amount is to try to find a particular motif that recurs through all parts of the Tārikh. If such a motif can be found, this is in itself an argument for the thesis that the Tārikh shows compositional unity, and thus shows the creative hand of a single author. Besides, recurring motifs are often used to illustrate a text’s major theme. Analysing the narrative use of a particular recurring motif in the Tārikh can tell us something about the main themes of this text.

Vogt has already acknowledged that literary motifs in classical Arabic historiography are an important object of study that he would have liked to have dealt with in his Figures de califes entre histoire et fiction. He notes that dreams are one of such motifs whose function deserves further study:

Dans le cadre de ce travail, il ne nous a pas été possible de traiter du motif littéraire d’une façon systématique... Le rêve, notamment le rêve en relation avec la souveraineté, est un tel motif littéraire.\textsuperscript{16}

Dreaming is here understood as experiencing something while asleep.\textsuperscript{17} The motif ‘dream’ can be easily and unambiguously detected, because the text specifies itself that a particular experience takes place in a dream, by a number of Arabic expressions that all carry the same meaning: ra‘ā ru’yā, ra‘ā fī al-mānām, ra‘ā fī al-nawm, ra‘ā hadhā al-layla or even ra‘ā ru‘yā fī al-nawm or atāha fī manāmihi.

The present study will take seriously Vogt’s suggestion that ‘dreams, especially dreams that relate to sovereignty’ make a fruitful option for further research relative to Tabari’s literary motifs. Vogt’s idea is particularly promising as dreams of rulers are already important in Mesopotamian literature and other pre-modern texts from the Mediterranean world and Europe. In the words of Robert Gnuse, an authority on dreams in the Bible and Late Antiquity, ‘kings in the ancient world supposedly received messages in dreams from deities

\textsuperscript{16} Vogt, p. 286, my italics.

concerning the affairs of the state, showing their high status in
relationship to the divine realm. Vogt’s hypothesis is also corroborated by those scholars who have
remarked upon the fact that rulers are the main focus of the Tārīkh. Humphreys, for instance, writes about Tabari’s outlook on history writ-
ing:

Kings are crucial in his scheme of history, for it is only kings among the leaders of humankind who have the luxury of accepting or rejecting God’s grace and guidance. For most of us, the critical moral lessons of history—indeed, the lessons of salvation and damnation—are manifested in the deeds of kings and the fates suffered by them. That rulers figure as personifications of forces in history is also concluded by Ulrika Mårtensson in an article on the Tārīkh:

Human history is given its observable course through each ruler’s wielding of power...The aim of the History [of Prophets and Kings]: to describe how those whom God has blessed (messengers, kings and caliphs) have wielded power... Thus both rule and succession are of prime interest to Tabari.

That rulers are indeed Tabari’s main focus can be concluded from an analysis of the chronicle’s structure. As will be shown in chapter two, not only an introductory statement by Tabari’s primary narrator, but also several structural aspects of the Tārīkh point to this: the various titles under which the work is known that contain the words mulūk (kings) and khulafa (caliphs), the division according to ‘regnal chapters’ and the extensive ‘obituary entries’ accorded to each caliph. Vogt’s predilection for dreams of rulers can be modified by pointing out the importance of the Abbasid caliphs for classical Islamic historians, as noted by Humphreys:

Since 132/750 the crucial issue for every historian had been the stance he ought to take toward the ‘Abbāsid. Should they be presented as usurpers of ‘Alīd (or even Umayyad) rights, as legitimate successors to an unbroken caliphal succes-
sion stretching back to Abī Bakr, or as the restorers of the purity of Muham-
mad’s umma? On one’s resolution of this problem rested his interpretation of Islamic history for the century and a half before the ‘Abbāsid Revolution.

40 Mårtensson, p. 300, see also p. 307 en p. 307 n. 76.
41 Humphreys, ‘Tārīkh’.
It is highly probable that dreams dreamt by rulers were written for purposes of political propaganda and legitimization of power, as is argued for example by Jacob Lassner.42 Here, however, we will focus not so much on the literal propagandistic messages put forward in the dreams, but on their function in the narrative.

*Dreams and historiography*

In the wider debate on classical Islamic historiography, that touched upon questions such as fact versus fiction, creative authorship and the historian’s voice, an interesting role is played by dreams. Indeed, within the context of Tabari’s *Tārīkh*, dreams stand out as red flags.

Against the background of the dry style, the description of the contents of dreams that indulges in fantastic imagery and metaphor, immediately calls our attention. Likewise, against the background of the realistic events that are reported, the miraculous event of a dream that comes true is immediately conspicuous. Dreams and other miracles have provoked different reactions among different categories of readers.

To a classical Islamic audience, miracles were proof that God intervened in the course of events, and as such miracles were the signposts of Sacred History. If an event had been predicted beforehand, this showed that that particular event was of true historical importance:

Ein Geschehen, für das sich keine Prophezeihungen in seiner Vorzeit ermitteln lassen, ermagelt der grundlegenden Legitimerung als historisches Ereignis von mehr als nur alltäglicher Bedeutung. Die Bedeutung eines Ereignisses und sein Rang in der Geschichte hängen von solchen Antizipationen ab.43

Dreams were considered divine messages in which God reveals his plan for the future course of history, and symbolic dreams show that all events are in fact expressions of a deeper, hidden truth. In short, to a classical audience dream reports are key passages that tell them how to interpret historiographical works and the history they speak about. In the words of Vogt: ‘À première vue, les songes n’ont qu’une valeur anecdotique, mais le fait que l’historiographie s’y intéresse montre évidem-

---


ment que l'historien y voit un moyen pour mieux comprendre le passé ainsi que le présent.\textsuperscript{44}

However, to modern positivists since the 19th century up to at least the 1970’s, who want to use works like the \textit{Tārikh} for the reconstruction of what has actually happened in the past, dreams and other miracles are unnerving anomalies. The inclusion of dream reports taints their sources, for accounts of miracles undermine the reliability of witness, transmitter and compiler alike. An eyewitness who reports a miracle is obviously lying, and transmitters and compilers who hand down and include such accounts are either superstitious (they believe in miracles) or uncritical (they accept even the most incredulous stories). Thus, whereas a classical audience was constantly on the lookout for dreams to guide their reading, positivists had them best swept under the rug. To paraphrase Chase Robinson in his handbook \textit{Islamic Historiography}: 'Dreams were about as useful to pre-modern historians as they are distressing to their modern readers'.\textsuperscript{45}

To a third group of readers, those interested in the literary aspects of historical narrative, miracles such as dreams that come true are an obvious sign of creative fiction. To these readers, the inclusion of a predictive dream proves that an inventive author has been at work. Instead of merely listing the events that happened, this author has added an element of his own, not only to embellish his account with metaphor, but also to provide his interpretation of the link between events, i.e. between earlier prediction and later outcome, and to express his ideas on the order behind this course of events.

\textit{Dreams and narratology}

Dreams not only stand out in Tabari’s \textit{Tārikh} and the debate on classical Islamic historiography, but are also highly interesting from the point of view of the method with which we propose to tackle both the text and the larger debate: narratology. As will be shown in chapter six, dreams have great narrative potential. Predictions of future doom are essential in provoking the particular behaviour that forms the gist of tragedy. Such forecasts are ideal to hint how the story might develop, and as these hints may be interpreted differently by reader and character, they are highly useful in creating the discrepancy in knowledge between the two that results in dramatic irony.

\textsuperscript{44} Vogt, p. 267.

\textsuperscript{45} Robinson, pp. 150-152.
Predictions based on dreams have even more narrative potential than those based on other omena. Whereas other omena are just patterns, dreams are texts, sometimes even narrative texts in their own right.\(^6\) As no one can corroborate what a dreamer experiences in the privacy of his sleep, dreams can be said only to exist as texts, when they are reported the next morning to another human being. According to some Ancient Near Eastern traditions, the basis for the oneiromantic interpretation is not what the dreamer experiences while asleep, but what he tells to the interpreter. The way a dream is told is the way it will come true. In the words of the Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad: ‘Only when it is expressed, only when it is told, does the prophecy contained in the dream become potent.’\(^7\)

Not only are dreams texts, the interpretation of dreams is also like the interpretation of texts. Oneirocritics use the same methods as textual exegetes: they look for metaphor, hyperbole, paronomasia and punning.\(^8\) Since oneirocriticism is similar to the interpretation of texts, readers can provide their own interpretation of dreams, which allows for an additional element of foreshadowing, as will be explained in chapter six.

\textit{Earlier studies of the narrative function of dreams in classical Arabic prose}

Whereas El-Hibri and Vogt have paid passing attention to dreams that occur in classical Arabic historiography from a literary point of view, they did not try to explain the central status of dreams in this genre.\(^9\) In addition to the works by El-Hibri and Vogt, there are three journal articles that deal with the narrative function of dreams in other genres than historiography.

Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1980) has set out to study how dreams function in entries from a biographical dictionary, but her conclusions are blurred by the abuse of narratological jargon. Giovanni Canova

\textsuperscript{8} See the previous work by Noegel. For a comparison between the interpretation of dreams and poetry, see Geert Jan van Gelder, \textit{Close Relationships: Incest and Inbreeding in Classical Arabic Literature} (London: Tauris, 2005), p. 174.
(1984) has analysed the narrative function of dreams in the sīra șa’biyya. He argues that these popular epics are fundamentally different from official Arabic literature, but—as will be shown in chapter six—his conclusions that dreams serve to add suspense and tragedy are equally applicable to a canonical text such as Tabari’s Tārikh. In a complex article from 1994, that has hitherto been largely neglected by western scholarship on dreams in Islam but which merits further attention, the Egyptian philosopher Nasr Abu Zayd has studied the narrative function of dreams in the Koran and Ibn șIshaq’s biography of the Prophet.

Abu Zayd studies whether dreams function as a ‘narrative incentive’ (hāfiz sardī) or as a ‘semantic unit’ (wihda dalâliyya). A narrative incentive is an element that reopens the story at a point where it has come to a standstill. According to Abu Zayd, a dream that functions as such a narrative incentive is Pharaoh’s dream of the cows in the Koran. After having been falsely accused of raping his master’s wife, Joseph is sent to prison where he is forgotten: the story has arrived at a dead end. However, Pharaoh’s inexplicable dream provides the incentive to reopen the narrative. It provides a reason to fetch Joseph from prison, which in turn leads to the hero’s come-back: he is appointed as Pharaoh’s second-in-command and reunited with his family.

It seems that with a ‘semantic unit’, Abu Zayd means an indispensable element of a story’s fābula, an element that has to be included in even the shortest summary of a story. Joseph’s dream of the prostrating stars is such a semantic unit, as it does much more than serve as the incentive to open the Joseph story: its fulfilment also provides closure to the story, and references to this dream are found throughout the narrative.

Tabari’s Tārikh and the Bible

Narratology is a broad field with an overwhelming amount of specialized technical terms. To keep this thesis understandable to scholars from outside the field of literary studies, and to reassure those weary of fashionable but ultimately evasive jargon, the narratological termino-

logy in this research has been kept to a bare minimum. I will base my analyses mostly on two theoretical works: the straightforward but comprehensive overviews by Mieke Bal (Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, 1997) and Slomith Rimmon-Kenan (Narrative Fiction, 1983). 53 Besides the terms author, primary narrator and secondary narrator I will also use the terms suspense, dramatic irony, foreshadowing and tragedy, all of which will be explained in chapter six.

In the context of dream reports, our analysis will be restricted to an analysis of Tabari’s Tāriḵh as a self-contained unity, in accordance to the ideal narratological approach. 54 The main modification of this ideal is that we cannot leave dream reports from the Bible out of consideration. The biblical influences on Tabari were in all probability not direct but through a variety of Jewish, Christian, and early Islamic legends. 55 Ignoring these intermediate stages, we will compare passages on dreams from the Tāriḵh with passages from a modern English translation of the Bible. This approach has the explicit purpose of emphasizing that Tabari’s Tāriḵh is part of that same cultural tradition which has deeply imbued the culture of Europe.

In this connection, our research will follow scholars such as Robinson who have placed Tabari’s text into the larger framework of the ‘grand narrative’ of biblical history: ‘the Islamic polity following the Persian and the Persian following the Israelite—the great transitio imperii (succession of empires) that also interested the historians of the Christian west’. To quote Robinson more fully:

The entire framework of pre-Islamic history—organized by a succession of polities, led by prophets or kings, and all transient—is made to presage the appearance of the Islamic polity under the leadership of Muhammad and then of the Abbadid caliphate itself. Universal history in the hands of al-Tabari is similarly teleological: some 14,000 years are covered in the ca. 8,000 pages of his History of Prophets and Kings, and history marches single file...Prophets familiar to us from the Biblical tradition, such as Moses and Abraham, are recast in terms made familiar to Muslims by Muhammad’s experience, while the pre-Islamic prophets in Arabia, who are entirely unfamiliar to anyone unread in the Qurʾān, are also made to follow the monotheist pattern. 56

54 Bal, p. 179.
56 Robinson, p. 137.
As we shall try to demonstrate, dream reports enabled teleologically oriented historians such as Tabari to repeat motifs that stress correspondences in remote historical periods, in passages that are hundreds of pages apart in his chronicle. We will test Robinson’s hypothesis that the literary patterning that characterizes Tabari’s pre-Islamic coverage also characterizes Islamic history, with the result that it is made ‘both relentlessly chronological and deeply mythical’:

[Classical] historians certainly made Muḥammad conform to the monotheist tradition that Muslims were themselves claiming—so much so, in fact, that his representation in the sīra presumes an understanding of early prophetic history, especially stories about Moses. Similar things can be said for...later political crises, such as...the civil war...between rival brothers to succeed Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809), where al-ʿAlī and al-Maʿmūn are in some respects patterned after Cain and Abel.57

As a prequel to the close reading of specific dream reports, this thesis will first provide a more general analysis of Tabari’s text (chapter two). We will analyze the meaning of the term tārikh in the title of the work, and present the various editions and the English translation. More importantly, the structure of the section of the Tārikh that deals with Islamic history (the part that has most puzzled modern readers) will be analyzed from a narratological perspective. Under the heading ‘Conventions of reticence’ we will provide a synthesis of the various suggestions given in the scholarly literature why Tabari refrains from directly commenting on events and on his sources.

These findings will provide the background for our analysis of the narrative function of dreams in the Tārikh. Chapter three will start with dreams from the pre-Islamic section. It will analyse a type of ruler dream that recurs six times in the Tārikh and compare Tabari’s treatment of this dream with its models in the Old and New Testaments. Chapters four, five and six will continue with ruler dreams from the Islamic section, focussing on the dreams of Abbasid caliphs. Special attention will be paid to the question whether motifs from the pre-Islamic section of the Tārikh, as treated in chapter two, also occur in the Islamic section.

Chapter seven will synthesize all findings and reach conclusions about the importance of narratology for the study of classical Islamic history writing.

57 Robinson, p. 138.